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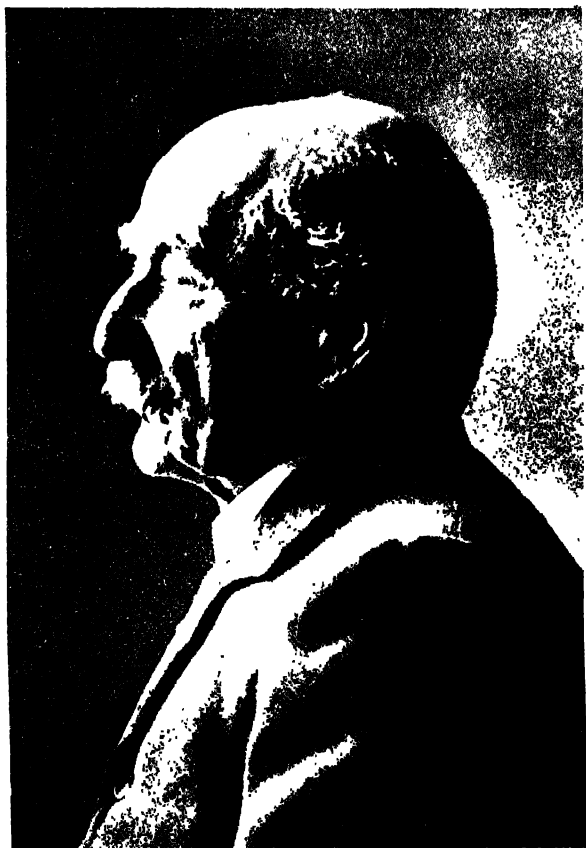
GENERAL EDITOR: BERTRAM CHRISTIAN

THOMAS HARDY









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THOMAS HARDY

# THOMAS HARDY

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# I

## HIS ARTISTIC PURPOSE

**T**HOMAS HARDY was born in 1840 ; he published his first novel in 1871, his last nearly twenty years ago. So far as chronology is concerned, then, he belongs not to the present period but to the Victorian, and some may wonder how he comes to be included in a series of "Writers of the Day." Well, there is no proof that Mr Hardy has yet given up writing for publication. Already, in the early years of this century, he has given the public one great surprise, in the issue of *The Dynasts*. And, since he has not been betrayed by advancing years into the error of tampering with the work of his maturity and putting forth in handsome "library" editions books "revised" into dullness, there is no saying what other surprises he may have in store. On the whole, however, it is more likely that by



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now he has said his say ; and it is the nature of what he has said already that entitles him to be considered a “ Writer of the Day.”

What “ the day ” soon to come—the day that immediately follows the European War—may be, no one may prophesy, although there is some excuse for foreseeing a sharper division than of old between those who will have been frightened back into the traditional philosophy and those who, accusing the traditional philosophy of more than half the present evils, will proclaim more stoutly, and perhaps shrilly, than before that it has made a muddle of the world and of man and must be swept quite away. By the traditional philosophy, I mean the view that life is governed by two conscious and opposing forces—good and evil. All Victorian literature is permeated with that idea ; it was the general postulate. God made the world and man, and saw that they were good. The devil, tempting man, and man giving way to the devil, have made the world evil. That good would ultimately

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triumph was the belief of all the optimists: of Browning, with the simple and cheery creed of Pippa: "God's in his heaven, All's right with the world"; of Tennyson, who saw good slowly evolving out of experimental stages. The same dualism is implicit even in poets of revolt, though the God of the general seemed to them to be the devil. To Shelley, to Swinburne, following Shelley, and in some degree to Morris, following his own bent, the powers of evil were the powers regarded by most as the agents of good. Law, property, the social order, the churches—to the poets of revolt these were the forces of evil. They cried out that the spirit of man should be trusted; that the law of love and freedom was more natural to man than the law of hate and repression, and that, left to himself, man would work his way to perfection upon his natural lines. But this, abating the attributions of personality and consciousness to the opposing forces, is only another aspect of the familiar dualism. It was left for the present

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day, the day before the war, to question the traditional philosophy; to ask whether the government of the world was, indeed, the work of two opposed powers; whether either would ever win; whether perfection were ever attainable. Speaking broadly (as one is compelled to speak in narrow space), the distinctive philosophy of our own day is impatient of extremes. It will not commit itself to the existence of absolute good or of absolute evil. It conceives it as most probable that neither has any share in the government of the world. It will go no further than to admit the existence of a force, sometimes called Will, more often called, with intentional vagueness, merely Life, which is, so far as human intelligence can understand it, neither good nor evil, neither benevolent nor malevolent, and utterly indifferent to the feelings of man.

Such a philosophy refrains from contemplating the possibility of a condition of perfect happiness either in this world or in any world, elsewhere or to come. It finds a certain state

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of things obtaining, and, so far as practice goes (though Hardy has little to do with practice), devotes its energy to making the best of that state of things by removing the most obvious follies and abuses, without asking whether they can ever all be removed.

Hardy is a "Writer of the Day" inasmuch as that philosophy is the foundation upon which all his work is built. Or, since metaphors are always dangerous, let us say roundly that it is the subject of his novels. The question: "What does Hardy write *about*?" might be answered in two ways. "Mainly about rural folk in a part of England that he calls Wessex," would be a fair answer. A more adequate would be: "About the struggles of individual human wills against the power that rules the world." Long before he stated it explicitly in *The Dynasts*, this idea of the world was implicit in Hardy's novels. "Philosophising" not at all until his later works, he expresses it continuously. He has warned his readers against the idea that he wrote in order to set

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forth any philosophy of life. Had he done so, he would scarcely be the artist that he is. He set himself to record, in various moods and from various points of view, life as he saw it. But that philosophy—a monistic philosophy, as they call it—was the condition of his seeing. And, in the end, it is the very spirit of the world that he creates, emerging finally from his work as the soul emerges from a picture or a piece of music. It is what he *gives* you. Mr Bernard Shaw, dashing wildly at this and a thousand other ideas, gives you a welter, all shifting flashes and rolling gloom. Hardy gives you, four-square, firmly founded, stately and serene, august in its own grave light, this world of his idea. He did not, of course, invent the notion; but he was the first to express it imperishably in art, and no one has yet given it clearer or nobler form.

Yet, after all, chronology must go for something. There is one matter upon which subsequent years have seen change, perhaps progress. Robbed by its own honesty of

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its dreams of perfection, either here or elsewhere, our "day" has yet learned to joy and to hope, within the limits set by its bracing caution. We have our dreamers. We may count Mr Wells among them, though he refuses to be pinned down to any philosophic conception of the universe; even Mr Galsworthy now and then gives a glimpse of a shy yet passionate belief in what the law of love would do. We have younger writers who do not weary of telling us that life, here and now, conditioned as it is, can be beautiful and happy, will we only live it bravely and truly, surrendering nothing to bogeys. When Mr Hardy was writing his novels, the time had not come, perhaps, for any clear apprehension of joy or of hope under the dominion of a power indifferent to human feeling. There are many traces in his prose, and many more in his poetry, of a spiritual loneliness, which a man of to-day need not feel. All about him were men still buoying themselves on hopes of the ultimate victory of good, and with that

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comfortable assurance blinding and deafening themselves to the misery rampant in the world about them. Hardy's work betrays a stern, sometimes almost an aggressive, resolve not to accept any of the conventional palliatives. One could point to passages where he appears, as it were, to catch himself slipping into sentimentality, and to pull himself up and out of it with an almost angry jerk. Nature, love, power—he sees the sadness, the insufficiency, in them all. In *The Woodlanders* there is a forest which any town-dweller might well long to visit—to watch the wood-cutters at work, to revel in the primroses and the bluebells, to dream away summer hours looking at the blue sky between the leafy boughs. Hardy hears branch creaking against branch in a long fight for space between two trees; he tells how the drippings from that most suave and beautiful of trees, the beech, kills all growth beneath it. On “Egdon Heath” one may tramp health-giving miles and rest tired limbs luxuriously. To Hardy, in *The Return of*

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*the Native*, Egdon is a type of the power that governs the world—immemorially old, barren, heedless; and, in fact, though not by intention, in its inevitable influence upon the human heart, sinister. Even in that supposed idyll, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, we must have the evening stillness disturbed by “some small bird that was being killed by an owl in the adjoining wood.”

And so with love. Half-a-century ago, the pressure of the easy, sentimental view of love upon a young and ardent mind was probably much greater than it is at present. Certainly, fiction and the drama, the channels through which what are called ideas now reach the public, did not then so frequently as now express a doubt whether all must necessarily be well with hero and heroine after their wedding in the last chapter or the last act. True, there are to-day quite as many novels and plays expressing the sentimental (which is also the merely physical) view of love as there were when Mr Hardy was young; but then there was



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scarcely anything to counteract them. And it cannot be wholly fanciful to see in him a young mind, passionate for truth, driven too far towards disbelief in the power of love by disgust at the untruths commonly accepted. It must be admitted that there is difficulty here. Hardy has published poems which cannot but shock and hurt a good many minds to-day—poems such as “The Minute before Meeting” and the finely worked, Wyatt-like song, “He abjures Love,” in the volume, *Time’s Laughing-stocks*, first published in 1909. It is all very well for the Preface to warn us that these poems are “dramatic monologues by different characters.” One feels that a man who had any knowledge of love would be all but unable to imagine such a mood, and that, could he imagine it, he would hold himself a traitor for giving expression to it, with whatever maddening complacency the conventions of his time might preach physical possession as the be-all of love. There are places, too, in the novels where Hardy seems

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to go out of his way in order to insist on the hollowness of love. For instance, in *The Well-Beloved*, no purpose seems to be served by the third Avice's flight from her husband. The parallel between the second Avice and the third appears to be forced just in order that one more pair of lovers may be shown as disappointed in each other. Yet from all the indications of this kind which the reader may discover in the novels and the poems, it would be unfair to conclude that Hardy misprizes or despises the love of man and woman; and when a critic finds in Hardy a "bitter contempt, as of a disillusioned sensualist," it can only be concluded that his reading of the novels was very prejudiced or very superficial. First of all, we have to remember that the novels contain studies of devotion more grand and more exalted than any other fiction, perhaps, has portrayed. The love of Marty South for Giles Winterborne in *The Woodlanders*; the love of Gabriel Oak for Bathsheba Everdene in *Far from the Madding Crowd*; the love

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of John Loveday for Anne Garland in *The Trumpet-Major*; the love of Tess for her husband in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*—these alone would amount to a refutation of any charge of contempt. But, in order to understand the matter clearly, we must push the inquiry a step farther. Philosophically, the novels, taken as a whole, are an expression of the belief that the world is governed by a force neither good nor evil, and indifferent to man's feelings. Artistically (and that, of course, is the more important of the two aspects) they are the creation of a world so governed, a world in which human individuality and desire are always in conflict with the indifferent governing power, just as in much Greek tragedy human individuality and desire are in conflict with fate, or the gods, or custom. Now, there is nothing that intensifies individuality and exerts desire so much as the love of man and woman; therefore, there is nothing that can bring individuality so sharply into conflict with the governing power. It lies, therefore,

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outside the artistic purpose of Mr Hardy's fiction to dwell upon the happiness of love, with possession or without. That is for novelists of a different scope and purpose—for novelists whose minds are conditioned by a faith in the possibility of happiness, either in the old, unregarding fashion or subject to the limitations and hesitancies of modern thought, or for novelists who catch at the whole of various life, seeing variety as the very thing which they are there to express. For Hardy, strictly faithful always to the artistic purpose which is to express his own mind, austere devoted to the building up of a world that shall embody life as he sees it, there is no turning aside to dwell on such moments of happiness as his lovers may have enjoyed. We know that Tess and her then enlightened Angel Clare must have been passionately happy under the shadow of dread in that deserted house in the New Forest; that Gabriel Oak found the reward of his long devotion to Bathsheba not all dust and ashes; that even Jude and Sue

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Bridehead must have laughed and joyed together during the days at Aldbrickham. A novelist with a different artistic bent might have narrated very similar events for the express purpose of bringing out the happiness. Hardy does not dwell upon the happiness. Something must be allowed for temperament; he becomes, as he has said, "vocal to" tragedy rather than to joy. But there is more than that. He must not be held "unperceiving because undemonstrative." To dwell on happiness is, simply, not his business. The world is very old, and the life of man is very brief. The Romans used to drink and talk in Casterbridge as men do to-day; over Egdon Heath the generations of men pass ceaselessly and leave no trace. Men and women are always snatching at happiness, striving to express and to fulfil themselves; and breaking themselves against a power that takes no heed of them.

If that were all, the novelist and poet would be robbed of his material by the very

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insignificance of man. The insignificance of man, the briefness of his days, are always present in Hardy's mind; he never fails to see them from the point of view of the indifferent power, and the enormous past is always present with him as a moment of time. Man would not be worth writing about, were it not for one of Mr Hardy's distinctive gifts as novelist and dramatist—what might be called his double vision. It is a peculiar gift; there is no author in whom it is so highly developed. If he sees the littleness, he sees also the greatness. Watching from infinity, he shows human life as futile and trivial. Down in the stress and the turmoil, looking out from the very heart of some farmer or milkmaid, he shows human life heroically grand. There is no trace in his work of contempt for human will, endurance and passion. All may be futile; but all are engrossing to the interest, and all may compel admiration. That is the answer to the charge of pessimism which has often been brought against Mr Hardy,

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and to which, in a story called *An Imaginative Woman*, he once indirectly replied thus: "He was a pessimist in so far as that character applies to a man who looks at the worst contingencies as well as the best in the human condition." The only true pessimism is indifference; and of indifference, except for here and there a phrase, there is no trace in Hardy. No man can be called pessimist who has created so many instances of powers, in themselves and within their limitations, great and beautiful. In this double vision of man's greatness and man's futility lies the secret of Hardy's tragedy. Here lies the secret of his irony in its various degrees—the irony of *Life's Little Ironies*, of the poems called *Satires of Circumstance*, and of the close of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. And here, in this double vision, lies the secret of the "humanitarian pity" which a just student has declared to be Hardy's ruling passion. There is no more pitiful book in all literature than *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and there is none more ruthless.

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Moreover, there is none less open to any charge of wanton cruelty. It is only here and there and (except, perhaps, for a single instance in *Jude the Obscure*) in minor details that Hardy shows himself any readier to sacrifice strict honesty in order to hurt than in order to assuage. The study of his collected work gives the impression of unswerving rectitude, artistic no less than philosophic. And this appears no less in his technique (if the old distinction may, for its convenience, be pardoned) than in his material. In his youth Mr Hardy studied and practised architecture; and, although in a little newspaper discussion of *The Dynasts* he once warned a brilliant critic that it is unsafe to draw analogies from one art to another, no writer on his work can avoid making the obvious comparison between the novels and well-planned, well-built works of architecture. In the details of the construction the general reader is as little likely to be interested as is the general amateur of architecture in specifications or



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calculations of proportion and strain. It would be amusing to take two novels—say *The Return of the Native* and *Jude the Obscure*—and work out the relations of the parts of each to the whole, and to compare the two different plans adopted by the architect to gain his two different effects. But, without doing that, the reader finds himself impressed by the solidity, the self-completeness, the four-squareness of a novel by Hardy; the richness and variety of the detail, all subordinated to the single effect, the shapeliness and majestic unity of the whole. He finds himself looking out, in each novel that he reads, for the particular influence that holds it all together, whether it be ostensibly a setting, like Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native* and the forest in *The Woodlanders*, or a bent of mind, as in *Jude the Obscure*. He finds himself enjoying more and more Hardy's various mastery of beginnings and endings. And the closer the study, the more pleasurable become the relations of mass to mass and of detail to

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structure, the entire absence of waste, the significance of the minutest touch. These novels are "well and truly" built, and by an artist of lofty rectitude.

The same rectitude explains a good deal that is otherwise puzzling in what, a few years ago, would have been called his "literary style." It gives opportunities for objection—and those opportunities have been taken. Hardy sometimes writes stiffly, even dully, and a little pompously. And—oh, horror!—he splits his infinitives. Yet it is unfair to pick out the sentences that creak or limp along and to judge them without relation to Hardy's prose as a whole. A wider view shows him declining to owe to beauty of language any effect which is not inherent in the story. For in diction as in construction, he trusts nothing to chance, and leaves nothing vague. He is not among those poets who, in the words of Socrates, write "not from any wisdom but in a kind of enthusiasm," and therefore say more than they know. Hardy's inspiration

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is continuous, and his genius is to master his strong feeling and thrusting imagination. And so, when he writes prose, his object is to say exactly what he means to say. If the subject is, in itself, great, or moving, or beautiful, then his prose will convey to you the impression of greatness, or will touch you to tears or uplift you with beauty. But he will never rely upon ornament, nor even upon subtlety of sound and cadence, for an effect which the situation cannot produce of itself. By way of illustration one might compare a famous passage from Hardy with a famous passage from Thackeray—the close of the chapter (III. vi.) in *Esmond* describing the murder of Duke Hamilton by Mohun.

That passage, with its lingering movement, its falling cadences, its little classical tag, is pure ornament. No one cares much about Duke Hamilton ; his death would leave the reader unmoved, were it not that Thackeray, by a deliberate exercise of his masterly literary craft, has flooded it with a lovely but extraneous light. Of such craft as this

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there is none in Hardy. What there is, one famous passage will show: Marty South's words over the tomb of Giles Winterborne at the close of *The Woodlanders*.

The speech has no adventitious beauty; and there is no trace of ornament about it. It is the full revelation of the lovely light that has all along been radiating from Marty South herself. It is the very voice of Marty, of her love for Giles, of her life and work in the forest. It is what the reader, in a way, expects: the perfect expression of something that the reader's imagination has been groping after. And it is great prose just because it is the exactly faithful wording of Hardy's great imagination. In the same way, the famous description of Egdon Heath at the beginning of *The Return of the Native* is noble prose because it is the exactly faithful expression of Hardy's grand and gloomy vision of the immemorially ancient and changeless ground upon which a few human ephemera are to strive and to suffer; and the famous description, in *Far from the*

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*Madding Crowd*, of the night upon which Gabriel Oak saw Bathsheba Everdene for the second time, owes its majesty to a similar contrast.

Indeed, there is only one province of his art in which Hardy is open to the least suspicion of turning on the limelight; and that is in the conversation of his rustic characters—those richly earthy philosophers and humorists, who have won favour for Hardy's work even with people violently opposed to Hardy's ideas of life.

“ They should ha' stuck to strings. Your brass-man is a rafting dog—well and good; your reed-man is a dab at stirring ye—well and good; your drum-man is a rare bowel-shaker—good again. But I don't care who hears me say it, nothing will spak to your heart wi' the sweetness o' the man of strings!”

Did old Dewy, or any other rustic outside Shakespeare's plays, ever talk like that? It is easier, on the whole, to believe in the flashing single phrases of these great lovers

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of phrases—for instance: “That man’s silence is wonderful to listen to”—than in Dewy’s balanced and ornate talk. But there are two things to remember (besides the fact that Mr Hardy may be trusted to know the ways of Wessex rustics pretty well). One is that rustics do preserve that joy in fine talk which other people have lost in these days when everyone is in a hurry and everyone who is not writing is reading. The other is that Hardy’s rustics were great and critical church-goers; and nine times out of ten, when the reader is doubtful about the verisimilitude of a phrase, he will find that the source of either words or cadence is the Bible, and especially the Book of Psalms. For all that, there will remain a few cases of rustic talk in which it is impossible not to see Hardy, the man of letters, just enjoying himself among words and phrases for their own sake—but never at any sacrifice of the ulterior truth which he is utterly purposed to express.

## II

### THE NOVELS

**H**ARD reading, the study and practice of architecture and the writing of poetry occupied Mr Hardy's life till he was twenty-seven. His interest in architecture (especially his horror of the "restoration" that became rife after the "religious awakening" set going by the Tractarian movement) appears in many of his novels; and the doings of George Somerset, in *A Laodicean*, may reflect the period of Mr Hardy's life during which he "sketched or measured many old country churches now pulled down or altered." In his twenty-seventh year he gave up living in London, and he gave up (of this there will be more to say later) the practice of poetry. He turned to prose fiction; and for its setting he chose, naturally, his own part of England, and particularly his own

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county of Dorset. It is the purpose of this chapter, not to criticise Hardy's prose fiction, but merely to give a brief descriptive outline of it; and for that purpose the safest course is to follow, not a deceptive chronology, but Mr Hardy's own division of his fiction into "Novels of Character and Environment," "Romances and Fantasies" and "Novels of Ingenuity," reversing, however, the order in which these divisions appear in the collected editions.

### I. "NOVELS OF INGENUITY"

The Novels of Ingenuity are three: *Desperate Remedies* (1871); *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876) and *A Laodicean* (1881). Of these only the first has ingenuity for its distinctive characteristic. *Desperate Remedies* was written while the author was "feeling his way to a method." Like many young writers, he attached much importance to plot; and he spun, with admirable dexterity and originality in arrangement,



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a tale of "mystery, entanglement, surprise, and moral obliquity." The young lovers are united in the end, but not before the heroine, Cytherea Graye, has been very strangely treated by a capricious and wealthy lady, Miss Aldclyffe, once loved by Cytherea's father. Miss Aldclyffe brings about a marriage between Cytherea and her own illegitimate son, Aeneas Manston, who, in order to win the girl, had got rid of his wife under strange and horrible circumstances. The author was doubtless thinking more of his plot than of his characters; but some of the characters foreshadow the greater creations that were to come. Aeneas Manston has the fierce passion that was to be shared by Farmer Boldwood in *Far from the Madding Crowd*; Miss Aldclyffe the impulsive, capricious nature that appears in Bathsheba Everdene and Eustacia Vye; Cytherea Graye the same "delight in kissing the rod by a punctilious observance of the self-immolating doctrines of the Sermon on the Mount" which brought Sue Bridehead

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to her mournful latter state. In the talk of the rural characters, and especially in the religious conversation of the drunken postman during his walk by night with Manston, there is the promise of a great deal that is characteristic of Hardy's maturity.

Both *The Hand of Ethelberta* and *A Laodicean* are, doubtless, novels, primarily, of ingenuity; but in neither is it the ingenuity that the reader remembers. *Ethelberta* was the ambitious daughter of a prolific butler. Having been stealthily married by the son of the rich house where she was governess, she was early left a widow; and the story shows her efforts to keep both her place in her husband's social circle and the secret of her birth. It was a long fight, and a brave one; and *Ethelberta* is all the more delightful an adventuress because she did not turn her back on her family, but worked for them as well as for herself and tried to give them the benefit of her own ambition. I confess to a weakness (not, I believe, widely shared) for *Ethelberta*. She is

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capricious and tiresome; but she had<sup>c</sup> courage and humour. I like her family—not only “April-natured, pink-cheeked,” soft little Picotee (their romantic mother had given fanciful names to all the female Chickerels), but those who could, or would, take no polish. And I am glad when Ethelberta, after suffering much humiliation (and some of it finely ridiculous) succeeds in “landing” the wicked old peer, whom she ruled so sternly when she had caught him.\* It was precisely the fate that suited her, and it left her courage and spirit unabated. The less interesting, and the less lifelike people are Ethelberta’s smart friends and admirers, Neigh, Ladywell and the rest. They are not intended to be attractive. Here is, to quote the Preface, “the drawing-room sketched from the point of view of the servants’ hall”; and Hardy is very much a writer of our day in his consciousness that the servants’ hall may be as interesting and as worth attention as the drawing-room. But the smart people in *The Hand of Ethel-*

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*berta* are not, perhaps, well done, even from that point of view. Indeed, the commonly accepted opinion that Hardy is less convincing in his studies of gentlefolk than of the others, is fairly well founded. Gentlefolk appear to him, perhaps, to be lacking in colour and flavour; he often seems impatient of social differences, and uses the theme pretty frequently. And so he is apt to use gentlefolk merely as foils to his richer creations, and he gives them, in many instances, "aristocratic" names which are mere substitutes for labels of "gentleman" or "lady." Yet one exception to this will have to be made at once. Paula Power, in the third "novel of ingenuity," *A Laodicean*, is rich, and just, if only just, a gentlewoman; but Paula is very real and very much alive. We first meet her trying to screw up her courage to take a physical and spiritual plunge, and be baptized according to the rites of her dead father's Baptist sect; and we see her, in an unforgettable scene, ignominiously fail. There is the note

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of her character. She is neither one thing nor the other. She is half romantic and half worldly. She lives in a wonderful old castle, yet belongs by inheritance to the modern world of science and commerce. She loves George Somerset, a young man of no great birth nor wealth, yet is drawn into an engagement with Captain De Stancy, an undesirable representative of the ancient family which once owned her castle. And even when she has married Somerset, and Stancy Castle is burned to the ground, her last words are lukewarm :

“ ‘ We ’ ll build a new house beside the ruin, and show the modern spirit for evermore. . . . But, George, I wish—— ’ And Paula repressed a sigh.

“ ‘ Well ? ’ ”

“ ‘ I wish my castle wasn ’ t burnt; and I wish you were a De Stancy ! ’ ”

That is what the reader takes away from *A Laodicean*, this profound study of a wavering temperament placed at a point of

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time and circumstance where decision is constantly called for. The book throws, moreover, light on a little wavering in Hardy's own mind—a wavering between his delight in ancient buildings and his suspicion of their darkness, their inconvenience, the spiritual atmosphere left behind by all the generations that have lived in them. When he comes to old Derriman's house in *The Trumpet-Major*, he is even less inclined than ever to admire; but he is nowhere merely impatient of old buildings. His mind dwells much upon the past, and often with a kindly pity. As for the “ingenuity” part of *A Laodicean*, there is, indeed, an ingenious plot (laboriously woven in illness) full of incident, which hangs chiefly on the machinations of Willy Dare, a horrible little villain, De Stancy's illegitimate son. Dare, conceived in sin, born wicked, and neglectfully brought up, is a powerful study of malignity and mischief; but he is a conventional though carefully rationalised figure.

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### II. "ROMANCES AND FANTASIES"

The second division, "Romances and Fantasies," consists of four novels: *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873); *The Trumpet-Major* (1880); *Two on a Tower* (1882); and *The Well-Beloved* (1892); and one volume of short stories, *A Group of Noble Dames* (1891).

Any reader who hopes to find Hardy's "romances" romantic in the usual sense of the word will be disappointed. The sweetest and sunniest of them all, *The Trumpet-Major*, ends in a way which the reader will regret, while he sees it to be inevitable. *A Pair of Blue Eyes* closes with a terrible irony, and *Two on a Tower* with a flash of dreadful significance. And neither of these two reveals much heroism or devotion in human nature. The romance of both lies rather in the nature of the events and in the ideas that fill the heads of the characters.

In *A Pair of Blue Eyes* a cottage-born young man, Stephen Smith, who has been trained as an architect, conceives a romantic

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passion for Elfride Swancourt, daughter of a clergyman. They go so far as running away together to be married—an attempt made abortive by the girl's half-heartedness. But they have been observed by a tragic woman, the mother of a rural youth, who had died for love of flighty Elfride; and Mrs Jethway's knowledge of the escapade is made, with masterly skill, to hang over Elfride's subsequent love affairs, and ultimately to rob her of the man she loved. For Stephen Smith holds no firm place in her rather shifty heart. While he is practising his profession in India, his position is taken by his own early patron and benefactor, Henry Knight, a man of letters. Upon Knight Mr Hardy has spent much care. He is the classical instance of that romantic desire for absolute virginity in a bride which Meredith has riddled with his wit; and the discovery that Elfride had been kissed before he kissed her was enough to set him against her. Mr Hardy emphasises Knight's own rectitude in these matters. He asked no more than



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he was prepared to give; yet the merely human reader, influenced, no doubt, by the sorrows of poor little Elfride, "overthrown by the coarse elements of accident," cannot resist the conviction that Knight's was not only an unpleasant but a profoundly immoral form of romance. Neither he nor Smith was, in the end, to win Elfride. In hot rivalry they scamper down by night to her Cornish home—only to find that the train which bore them bore also her corpse. They have not even the right to watch by her tomb, for she had married another man. It is one of the most impressive happenings in all Hardy's fiction. And in other respects this book is peculiarly interesting. It contains some characteristic ideas on chance and circumstance. It lays down the puzzling suggestion that men go ever forward, while women make no progress—a notion flatly opposite to the common experience, which surely is that every generation of women makes an advance, while every generation of men rises only to subside, in sense and courage,

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to where its predecessor ended. The conversation of the men who are making ready a family vault for the reception of a newly dead is, indeed, Shakespearian, but it is intensely Hardian and of the most pregnant and profound humour. And the scene of the story is laid in a part of "Wessex" to which Hardy seldom takes his readers—the northern coast of Cornwall. The "cliff without a name," the scene of Knight's rescue by Elfride's daring expedient, has been identified as Beemy High Cliff, near Pentargan; and the reader who studies the topography of this novel in connection with the "Poems of 1912-13" in the volume called *Satires of Circumstance*, will gather some unessential but interesting knowledge about Elfride Swancourt and her pony, and Mr Hardy's vision of the country round Launceston and Boscastle.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Hermann Lea's *Thomas Hardy's Wessex*. Mr Lea's book, which was written with Mr Hardy's sanction and help, is the only safe guide to the topography of the Wessex novels and poems.

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*The Trumpet-Major* takes us to "South Wessex"—the region of Weymouth and the downs behind it—and to a period which Mr Hardy knows thoroughly, and of which he was to make notable use in later years, the era of the Napoleonic wars. In *The Trumpet-Major*, the sun always seems to be shining. The story and the people have more amenity than in any other of the novels, even than those in the deceptive *Under the Greenwood Tree*. The tale is of a sweet girl, Anne Garland, and two brothers Loveday, who loved her: the harum-scarum sailor, Robert, who won her, and John, the gentle, sensitive soldier, who lost her. The very sadness in the book—the sadness of love unsatisfied, of the life that comes and goes so swiftly over the enduring downs and by the enduring sea—is mellow. There is scarcely a trace of bitterness in all the tale, and one can do no more than laugh kindly at the braggart and gull, Festus Derriman. Hardy seems to make a point in this book of bringing out the fine manners and gentle natures

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of professional soldiers. John Loveday and his friends of the army are well-behaved and, to some extent, cultivated men. It is Festus Derriman, an amateur soldier, one of the yeomanry, who swaggers, insults women, is ignorant and boorish, and gives an example of cowardice which is one of the most amusing passages in English fiction. And over all the book broods the spirit of Overcombe Mill, with its pleasant rooms, its gardens, and the stream where the cavalry soldiers came down to water their horses—quiet, sweet, English country life in summer-time, persisting through all the alarms and uncertainty of a time when the nation was fighting, though in what we see now to have been a very small way, for its life.

Few, even of Hardy's most thorough admirers, like *Two on a Tower*; and yet it is a book of a peculiar interest. It is the story of a mature woman of position who loved a youth of humbler station than her own. With much hesitation, Lady Constantine went with Swithin St Cleeve to the altar,

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only to learn later that her jealous and brutal husband had been alive at the time of the ceremony. A widow at last, she is deterred from marrying Swithin by the discovery that the marriage would deprive the young astronomer of a comfortable income. She bids him good-bye; and, when he has left England for the Cape, finds that she is going to have a child by him. Unable to call him back, she marries, on the advice of her brother, a bishop who had been paying court to her. Over the bishop's discovery of her reason for marrying him, over what he made her suffer in return, a veil is drawn. We learn it almost wholly in one terrible revealing flash in the last sentence of the book, when the unhappy woman, now again widowed, dies of happiness in the arms of the returned Swithin. She died of happiness at the sound of a lie; for the young man was not true to her, and did not want an aged and sorrow-marked woman for his wife. There was pretty young Tabitha Lark in the background. The

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romance of the tale is clear in the setting of the principal scene—an ancient barrow, and on the summit of it a lonely tower whereupon Swithin had his observatory; in the impulsive and heroic love of Lady Constantine, and in the beauty with which her passion invests the pretty, tiresome youth. But, once more, the romance is not the distinctive characteristic of the story. Here we see not only the author's admiration and pity for so beautiful and so fatal a thing as Lady Constantine's love for St Cleeve, but—perhaps for the first time, hinted rather than stated, clearly felt but cautiously suppressed—a charge that was to be brought explicitly in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. In itself Lady Constantine's love for St Cleeve was beautiful; it might have been beneficent but for the world and its ordinances and its opinions, the conventions about love, about marriage, about social standing. The story, in fact, ascribes implicitly the unhappiness of its characters not only to the conflict of individuality with

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the force that governs the world, but to a conflict between man's natural impulses and a repressive power of his own making. In answer to man's affirmative "I will!" the infinite says nothing: it works on. It is humanity that, afraid to trust itself, orders: "Thou shalt not," and claims divine authority for the negation.

*The Well-Beloved* (brought out serially 1892, revised and published in book form 1897) has been severely criticised, and is not, I believe, generally liked. True, it lacks the greatness of Hardy's most notable conceptions; but in this light and "frankly fantastic" tale there is more charm than in any one of the volumes except *The Trumpet-Major*. The scene is laid in the "Isle of Slingers," which is Portland; and, in reading the story, it is important to give attention to all that the author has to say about Portland, its position and its atmosphere, the people who live there and their customs and manners. For out of these things springs the peculiar temperament of

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Jocelyn Pierston, the painter, and the influence of these things shapes the whole odd and attractive tale. Pierston, an Islander by birth, fell in love with Island women of three generations: first with a girl, Avice Caro the first, then with her daughter, Avice Caro the second, and then with her granddaughter, Avice Caro the third. And yet he was in love with none of them, but always with that ideal, that Well-Beloved, which flitted from woman to woman, never to abide in any. No doubt the poor gentleman is ridiculous; and when we leave him, elderly and with sciatica, married at last to an elderly and rheumatic woman, whose name was not Avice Caro, and whose form the Well-Beloved had long ago quitted, we know that his creator very clearly perceived how ridiculous he was. Yet he must be a very unimaginative or a very lucky lover who does not feel his own kinship to Jocelyn Pierston, nor perceive how ridicule is by no means all that he deserves, or all that he receives from Mr



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Hardy. The story is forced a little arbitrarily into regularity of shape; but it is constructed with all Hardy's masterly cunning; and, like Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*, or the forest in *The Woodlanders*, Portland permeates the tale.

Better even than Scott, Hardy knows the value of the setting; and he revealed new possibilities for its significance. Even when, with *A Group of Noble Dames* (1891), we come to his first volume of short stories, we find the setting something more than just a thread to string tales upon. These stories of great ladies of the past do, somehow, gain in colour when it is remembered that they are supposed to be narrated by the male members of a Field and Antiquarian Club who are kept by the rain within the walls of the local museum. The setting may have been an afterthought; but it is characteristic. These stories of the passions and humours of dead men and women are told among the remains of prehistoric beasts, bones of Vespasian's soldiery, birds that

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were killed and stuffed yesterday or a year ago. And they are told by men who will soon be dead. There is the characteristic double vision—the briefness of life, the importance to each man and woman of his own tiny span. The tales themselves are among the fruits of Mr Hardy's delvings into the records of the past, which undoubtedly fascinate him, be they the remains of past epochs in Maumbury Rings or in his own garden, or the stories of men and women that may be discovered from family trees or the lips of the aged. These Noble Dames and their stories are very various—tragical, bitter, horrible, amusing; but in all we see human desire and endeavour thwarted by the irony of circumstance, which is only the indifference of fate. Each tale is very finely worked; the whole presents a rich variety of life; and it is worth noticing how, with very little insistence on detail, Hardy's knowledge and imagination carry the reader right into the atmosphere of each "period." We shall meet with this power again in his crowning work.

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### III. NOVELS OF CHARACTER AND ENVIRONMENT

This group of nine volumes falls inevitably into subdivisions. One of them contains *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *The Woodlanders*, and another *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. The remaining three books are *Under the Greenwood Tree* and two volumes of short stories, *Wessex Tales* and *Life's Little Ironies*, to which may be added the collection entitled *A Changed Man*, at present standing alone in Mr Hardy's fourth division, "Mixed Novels." Since the volume last mentioned in this little handbook to Hardy happens to be a volume of short stories, it may be convenient to take the other volumes of stories next.

Because Mr Hardy does not include this or that book in the division of romances, it does not follow that the book is devoid of romance. There is romance in each of

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these three volumes of short stories; and *The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion* is perhaps the most romantic tale that Hardy ever wrote. But, as the title of *Wessex Tales* implies, the leading characteristic of these stories is "local colour," as Hardy understands it—the imaginative creation of an abiding world which shall reflect the scenes, customs, habits, thoughts and deeds of an actual and fugitive world. *The Three Strangers* is that intensely dramatic tale (it has been turned into a play) of a hangman and his intended victim hobnobbing together over the fire at a christening party in a shepherd's lonely cottage, and of the effect upon their subsequent relations of the entrance of the criminal's brother. Other notable tales in the book are the grisly story of *The Withered Arm*, and the stirring yarn—ironical enough, but warmed with Hardy's humour at its most genial—about the smuggling young widow and the innocent little minister, called *The Distracted Preacher*. In three, at least, out of the six stories in

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this book, the detail of fading times is preserved for us as an integral part of the matter. *Life's Little Ironies* (1894) returns, in the main, to Hardy's peculiar artistic purpose. We see human endeavour thwarted and human happiness destroyed by the action of circumstance, the expression, that is, of the indifferent power that rules the world, using, it must be remembered, as its instruments the passions, or stupidity, or timidity, of human beings. This is the burden of seven, at least, out of the stories included under this head. There is a calm ruthlessness about them, which might be mistaken for contempt of human nature, were Hardy's peculiar artistic purpose lost sight of. As a rule, it is very little that the active or imaginative people in these stories ask of life; just as it was very little that Tess asked of life. But always there is some stupidity, some prejudice, some selfishness, to stand between them and their desire, or some weakness of their own that spoils their plans. "Circumstance" usually means

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Man. The same volume contains also a set of "colloquial sketches" called *A Few Crusted Characters*, mainly rich and humorous studies of village words and ways. *A Changed Man* (1913) is a collection of stories, various in character and date. The story which gives its title to the volume might have been included among *Life's Little Ironies*, and only its length, probably, prevents *The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid* from having a place among the Romances and Fantasies.

I have called *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) a deceptive work, a supposed idyll. Certainly it deceives nine young readers out of ten. They take it to be no more than it professes to be—"a rural painting of the Dutch School," a smooth and minute study of village life some few years ago, grouped about the charming story of two young rustic lovers who, after some pretty troubles and set-backs, were happily married. It saddens me to read it now; because I seem to detect the young author accepting a little

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too complacently the common view that women are, of course, shifty and deceitful creatures, traps for trusting men, and that it really does not much matter. This pretty young schoolmistress, Fancy Day, started married life with her simple Dick Dewy on a lie; and, if we are to smile at this, it can only be bitterly. I can never make the story fit in with the true, the ruthless yet pitiful Hardy, who certainly may sometimes come near to sneering at human weakness and cowardice, but never pretends that it does not matter. It seems as though he was so engrossed on the rich detail and the fine surface of this Dutch painting that he let the "moral" slip into expression almost unnoticed. And that, of course, is the way to take the book. The wise reader will not bother about Fancy Day's character: enough that she is "a bunch of sweets." He will give himself up to the obvious charm of this exquisite little work, and revel in the country setting, the country humours, the rich and fragrant air of the recent but

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irrecoverable past. This is the book that describes the Mellstock choir and the musicians in the west gallery of the church, in the days before the harmonium became sanctified. Here we meet old Dewy, and Reuben Dewy, Michael Mail, Thomas Leaf, Joseph Bowman, and the others who go singing and playing round the neighbourhood on Christmas Eve; and a quarter of a century later the author's mind and affections were still lingering round these dead and gone dear fellows, as we learn from the poem, "The Dead Quire." Old ways, old music, good cider, country dancing (here is the most famous dance of the many that Hardy has described), racy and flavoursome speech—the book is rich in the mellow atmosphere that such things induce. It is foolish to be troubled about one shifty girl and one deluded boy, when you may shake with laughter at the musicians' call upon the parson to discuss his desire to banish their strings from the church and have an organ, or may see the men take off their coats at



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the Dewys' dance, or listen to their talk—the best in all Hardy save that round the malter's kiln in the next book on our list.

With *Far from the Madding Crowd* we come to the first of the four novels which are still most commonly accepted as the crown of Hardy's work. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* have still their irreconcilable enemies; the poems and *The Dynasts* have not yet come into their own. On *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1885) and *The Woodlanders* (1887) opinion is not divided. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* follows the fortunes of one man rather than of a group, and depends rather upon a single temperament than upon a clash of desires. The other three are all tragic novels of great passions among small groups of people in rural surroundings; and some resemblance in ground-plan may be noticed between them. In each case a selfish love comes into conflict with an unselfish. In *Far from the*

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*Madding Crowd* (which is the most violent in action, and has been turned into a play) the grouping is a little more complicated than in the others. Unselfish love is represented in chief by Gabriel Oak, shepherd. Gabriel served with devotion for many years the high-spirited and capricious Bathsheba Everdene, into whose employ the loss of his own farm had brought him. Selfish love has two representatives: the lady-killer, Sergeant Troy, who fascinated Bathsheba into marrying him and then treated her badly, and Farmer Boldwood, perhaps the most striking example in literature of a man tortured by a furious desire to possess a woman. In Fanny Robin, seduced and deserted by Troy, we have a minor example of unselfish devotion. These are the characters who play out their passionate parts under the shadow of a fate that cares nothing whether they suffer or rejoice and thwarts without malignity. The conditions mean death for Fanny Robin, in child-bed at the workhouse, death for Troy, who is murdered

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by Boldwood, and worse than death for Boldwood, who is confined as a lunatic. Gabriel and Bathsheba are left, to join hands at last, and over dreadful memories.

In *The Return of the Native*, the selfish pair are Eustacia Vye, the restless, the impulsive, the vulgar-natured and yet somehow grand; and Damon Wildeve, an engineer turned publican. Unselfish love is represented by Thomasin Yeobright, who, early in the story, marries Wildeve, and her faithful adorer, the reddleman, Diggory Venn. And the group is completed by the presence of a characteristically Hardian figure, Thomasin's brother Clym, a spirit too fine to be content with life as it comes, yet too weak to make life what he desires it. Married to Eustacia Vye, he is crushed between the scorn for him that succeeds her brief passion and Wildeve's desire to rob him of the dangerous and beautiful creature. Clym Yeobright is left alive, indeed, after Eustacia and Wildeve have been whirled by desire to death; and probably he was

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not unhappy as a purblind itinerant open-air preacher and lecturer on "morally unimpeachable subjects." But his suffering and humiliation had been terrible. Eustacia had injured him through his sense of duty to that powerful woman, his mother; and to the rather womanish young man Hardy has given a touch of that love of self-abasement in remorse which he finds characteristic of women. Through the whole story of these brief and strepitous passions is perceived Egdon Heath, immemorially ancient, silent, heedless and changeless, a type of the power that governed these hot and busy desires in everlasting indifference.

In *The Woodlanders* we have Marty South's devotion to Giles Winterborne, and Giles Winterborne's devotion to Grace Melbury, to set against the vagrant lusts of Grace's husband, the doctor Edred Fitzpiers, and of the wealthy widow, Felice Charmond. Grace ultimately takes her husband back after his flight with Mrs Charmond, just as she had allowed herself to be pushed by her

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ambitious father into the marriage, in spite of her suspicion of Fitzpiers's low intrigue with the village girl, Suke Damson. Half lady, half peasant, educated above her station and dowered with instinct more homely than her education, Grace has not the force to take her own line and keep to it; and at the critical moment she let her loved Giles die through her fear of flouting the proprieties. Marty and Winterborne were of different metal; against all the bludgeonings of fate they stand firm and proud in their humility. Mrs Charmond forms another contrast. She is a selfish and self-pitying woman, afraid of life. She shuts out the daylight with heavy curtains, and glibly she reels off the familiar complaints of the self-pitying against "the terrible insistencies of society," the "correctives and regulations pretendedly framed that society may tend to perfection," and so forth. When Hardy wants to show us someone on whom the conventions do press heavily, he chooses other natures than this.

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These three are the novels in which certain characteristics of Hardy's fiction are perhaps best studied. I have said something of his construction and of his ideas of life, and would here dwell rather upon certain details. One is his power of conveying the idea of grandeur. When we know Gabriel Oak's wide smile, and Gabriel Oak's laborious way of looking at his watch, we have a very homely picture of a young farmer. And then Hardy, in a famous passage, takes him out under the stars on a winter night, and the young farmer, so far from being dwarfed by this contrast with the infinite heavens, reveals a grandeur which never after leaves him. Another point worth notice is his minute knowledge of nature. To know the general qualities and particular features of a whole district as Hardy knows those of his Wessex is a rare achievement; but beyond that he appears to know every sight and sound of life, in fur or feather or leaf, at all seasons of the year. This minute observation brings constant pleasure to the reader, and it plays

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a great part in the effect of those descriptions of which Hardy is a master. Knowing all, he uses the poet's faculty of selecting just what will be most effective. He does not often surprise one with such a phrase as "the restless and shadowy figure of a colt wandered about a loose-box," which makes all Boldwood's stable vivid. But constantly one feels that he knows, that he is right. And to this mastery of detail we owe part of the tremendous effect of certain great scenes: the thunderstorm during which Oak saved Bathsheba's ricks; the fog that overtook the cart conveying Fanny Robin's body from the workhouse and caused that Chopinesque drip, drip of moisture on the coffin, while the drivers were getting drunk in the inn; the wonderful scene where Wildeve and Venn dice for Mrs Yeobright's money by the light of glow-worms on the heath. *The Woodlanders* contains fewer "great scenes" than the other two; but throughout it we feel the insistence of the author's minute knowledge of forest life;

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and Crabbe himself never painted desolation with more force than has Hardy when describing, in the forty-second chapter, the view from Grace's window.

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* approaches without quite reaching the method of the two great novels which will close this brief account of the prose fiction. That is to say, it is concerned not so much with the interaction of a group of people as with the interactions of temperament and circumstance in the life of a single person. Michael Henchard, hay-trusser, sold his wife when he was drunk. Left alone, he repented and reformed, vowing to drink no more intoxicants for twenty years. By energy and will he made money, and became the Mayor of Casterbridge. He was rich, respected and respectable. With the return of his wife and the girl whom he supposes to be his own daughter, he won also love and peace. And then, little by little, he was stripped of everything: position, means, respect and love. He went down and down, till, lonelier



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than ever he had been before, he died miserably in a lonely mud hut on Egdon Heath. And the cause of all was his own wrong-headedness. Henchard, in homely phrase, was a "contráry" man. The circumstance which, in Hardy's view, is the indifferent enemy of human desire used Henchard himself for Henchard's destruction. He had huge desires for the right; the contráriness in his own nature invariably drove him to ruin his own endeavours. There is dreadful power in this tragedy of a man with so much that was great in him, so much energy, so much determination, so much loving-kindness and so much rectitude, broken limb by limb on the wheel of his own wrong-headedness. The book is remarkable, also, for its minute description of the town of Casterbridge, or Dorchester, as it used to be, and of the adjacent Maumbury Rings, now famous for the excavations that have recently taken place there; and for its pictures of local customs such as the "skimmity-ride."

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*The Woodlanders* closes an epoch in Hardy's authorship. During the next four years he published only the two volumes of short stories, *Wessex Tales* and *A Group of Noble Dames*. Then, in 1891, came *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, in its first complete and single shape, and set the reading and the criticising worlds by the ears. It is only necessary to read the Preface of the 1892 edition to understand the kind of attacks that were made upon the book; and it is only necessary to refer to them because they illustrate Hardy's position as a "writer of the day." Were *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* newly published this year, not so many would be found, I imagine, to decry it as an immoral work, not so many afraid to admit that *Tess* was, as the title page roundly claims for her, a pure woman, and her tragedy an enlarging and ennobling study. Still, there was some excuse for the objectors of twenty-five years ago. The novel doubtless took them by surprise. They had become used to majestic tragedies that remain strictly dramatic,

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novels in which the author presented his view of life implicitly. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* he became explicit. He showed a lovely nature tortured by the action of circumstance—true; but circumstance working through the timidity and stupidity of man himself. And this timidity and stupidity he squarely arraigned. Judgments which were implied in *Two on a Tower* are stated in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Although she was, in the common phrase, “ruined” when a very young girl, Tess might have lived a happy and beneficent life, had it not been for the sense of sin created in her by the collective timidity of society, and for the conventions that proclaimed her an outcast. Those conventions bore hard upon her in many ways; they crushed her when concentrated in her husband, Angel Clare. Various attempts have been made to get round this position, as attempts are always being made to get round Shelley, or Swinburne, or Blake—to explain that Hardy did not mean what he said, or did not

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understand what he meant. But there is no escaping it. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and in *Jude the Obscure* he brings definite charges against the collective judgment of society, which, in the belief that it can so protect itself, destroys some of its finest and most sensitive material. On the beauty of Tess's character there is no need to dwell. Her fineness and clarity of spirit, her faith and devotion, her strength and tenacity in love, her essential sweetness, compel the reader to share the author's anguish of pity for her sorrows, his passionate indignation at the stupid waste of her lovely qualities. No novel by Hardy, perhaps no novel ever written, is so full of pity as this; at once so perfect in artistic unity, and so hot an expression of personal feeling.

Tess Durbeyfield, the daughter of poor and feckless parents and descendant of a proud and ancient family, was forcibly seduced by a blackguard young man of means whose father had taken, with no right to it, Tess's proper surname of D'Urberville. A child

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was born, but died in infancy. Some years later, when she was working as a milkmaid on a large dairy farm, she became betrothed to a clergyman's son, Angel Clare, who was learning farming from her employer. On their wedding night, and not before, Tess confessed to him the past episode of Alec D'Urberville; and thereupon Clare, himself no more virgin than Tess and in temperament lewd where she was chaste, left her. After a brave fight against poverty and other evils, she was forced, by the needs of her family, into the protection of Alec D'Urberville, whose lusts had only been temporarily diverted into a spell of "conversion" and open-air preaching. Clare, returning repentant from Canada, found her living with D'Urberville. In order to be free to join her husband, Tess murdered her protector. After a brief concealment with Clare in an empty house in the New Forest, she ~~was~~ arrested, tried and hanged. That is the skeleton of the story. The gist of it is the study of a woman with a passion for purity,

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set amid circumstances which compel the defilement of her body and the starving of her spirit. True, she is weak, in all but her power of loving and enduring ; but that very strength in loving is the secret of her weakness. If Angel Clare did not want her, if he would never come back to her, then what did her body matter ? D'Urberville might have that, though her resistance was long and brave. Her spirit, her love, remained unalterably Clare's, beyond reach of defilement. And, once Clare has returned to her, she must free herself for him by the quickest and most thorough means.

In the spoiling of such a nature, it is bad to play Alec D'Urberville's part ; but it is worse to play Angel Clare's. Clare is the most eminent example of that half-development, to which we find Hardy over and over again ascribing the sorrow and mischief of human life. Henry Knight was, at least, fair. If his demand for virginity was at bottom only a refinement of fastidious desire, he asked no more of Elfride Swancourt

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than he was able to bring her. But Clare was half-baked, and therefore unjust and insincere. He had outgrown the narrow orthodoxy of his family; but he remained conventional enough to regard Tess as hopelessly soiled, and himself as still marriageable. His desertion of his wife is perhaps the cruellest action ever imagined as the result of a false idea of purity; yet it shows no touch of exaggeration. Tess had broken no moral law; she had fulfilled a natural law; but in the eyes of society she was a "fallen" woman. And the rough and ready judgment of society, implanted in her own bosom and acting upon her through other people, wasted her youth, her beauty, her motherhood, her love, her power of enjoying and of spreading joy, and drove her to misery, crime and a violent death. The folly and the cruelty of it have wrought the author into an indignation so passionate that here and there he deserts the strictly dramatic manner of his preceding novels, and breaks into direct comment—flames

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which leap suddenly from the furnace of his spirit, and, so far from breaking or lessening the force of his creation, reveal its intense heat. I believe that that, moreover, is the explanation of a sentence in the last paragraph of the book—a sentence that has puzzled and pained many of his readers: “ ‘ Justice ’ was done, and the President of the Immortals (in Æschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess.” Few will doubt the profound injustice of the social justice which murdered Tess after perverting her ; but the President of the Immortals and his “ sport ” do not seem to belong to Hardy’s conception of the government of the world. Nowhere else do we find him suggesting that the Immanent Will takes any pleasure in the sorrows of mankind, or feels any jealousy of their joy. We are to understand that it is death to the frogs without being sport to the boys. But perhaps the cry of Gloucester in *King Lear* :

“ As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods ;  
They kill us for their sport ”



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chimed in with Hardy's just anger at the waste and ruin of Tess, and he, so to speak, shook his fist at the unheeding power. The phrase certainly differs in tone from the slow, remorseless quiet with which the story moves on. It "slipped out." And yet one cannot wish it away. If it is not philosophically consonant with the novel as a whole, it gives the reader's feelings a thrill of sympathetic relief.

The business of an artist, as Hardy has more than once pleaded in self-defence, is to create a world that shall express the world as he sees it. But, in the long run, great art helps to make the actual world; and that must be my excuse for suggesting the practical effect of such a book as *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Its august and simple beauties of setting, of character, of movement, are beyond need of discussion; but what of its "moral"? It has been called pessimistic: Hardy's view of all life has been called pessimistic; and now and then, as we have seen, he himself seems to slip into

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an indifference very unlike that counsel to "Accept" which Meredith puts into the mouth of Earth. But, quite apart from the enlarging and vivifying influence of a great work of art, I cannot find *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* anything but an optimistic book. Tess was no towering heroine of huge desires; she was a simple, humble, homespun girl who asked only for a quiet happiness. But if homespun humanity can be so beautiful as this, can so love and endure and trust, may we not feel joy and pride? To go one step farther: when we contemplate all this beauty slowly ruined by causes that man himself has it in his power to remove, what results but a determination, ever more clearly and more widely formed, to remove them as soon as may be, to let no stupidity or timidity stand in the way of such virtue as human nature may possess, such happiness as human nature may realise? It can never be perfect virtue, it can never be perfect happiness; but here is the true optimism—not that which

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counsels man to hold off from what he may here and now achieve because it can never be perfect, or because, if he shrinks up from imperfect life now, he will some day enjoy perfect life; but that which proclaims to him his own strength and beauty, and shows him how, though limited in scope and always under the shadow of a destiny that cares not whether he be happy or unhappy, he may strip away artificial causes of misery and waste. I make no pretence of committing Mr Hardy to these inferences from his novel. They do not, indeed, exactly fit the scheme of the universe which forms the idea-plot of *The Dynasts*, though from *The Dynasts* I might cull a line or two that would support them. But these are the inferences that some minds cannot avoid drawing from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

*Jude the Obscure* (1895) is another exposition of the conflict between love and morality. It is more terrible and less beautiful than its predecessor. It hurts more and inspires less; it rouses indignation without leaving

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hope; and if a reader said that it depressed instead of exalting him, I could understand, though not agree. There are several reasons for this. One is that it has not the simple, tragic grandeur of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. It is a more complex and subtle story. But perhaps the chief reason is that Jude, who is admirable and pitiable, is not lovable as Tess is lovable. Only Christian charity could pretend to love poor Jude, with the taint of grossness always dragging him down. Jude is the capital instance of that half-and-half condition which Hardy presents to us in so many different guises. His mind is far above his station; his passions keep him from rising to the level of his mind. And circumstance constantly arranged things so that he should pay the uttermost penalties for this dualism in his nature. A poor boy with a passion for learning, he should have been above the allurements of a gross village girl; but he slipped into an intrigue with her, and was entrapped into a marriage that forced him to be stonemason instead of

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scholar. Deserted by his degrading Arabella, he tried once more to rise. He would aim at sanctity, not worldly learning; he would be theologian and priest. But he fell in love with his cousin, Sue Bridehead; and Sue married Phillotson, a schoolmaster, and Jude himself was a married man. A "guilty" love of that kind barred to him sanctity and the priesthood. And always there was lurking in him the temptation to turn to drink. Drunkenness was his method of asserting his own individuality, of defying the bewilderment induced by this conflict between natural desires and the effort after social and intellectual advancement. The tragic story shows Jude constantly striving to advance, and inevitably thrown back by the wire entanglements of the social law with which "nature" brought him into conflict; acute enough to see that that law made of him a sinner where he had no intention of sinning, yet not strong enough to conquer the needs that led him to offend against it. He made a brave attempt to

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live as he pleased, unostentatiously, without regard to that law. Sue, who had a physical horror of her elderly husband, ran away from him to Jude. They lived together as brother and sister. Then, under the pressure of circumstance, Sue yielded to Jude's desire for a more intimate union. They hovered on the brink of marriage; but from marriage both their family history and their own fear of the effect of law upon love turned them aside. They had children; but they were not married, they were not "respectable." And under the social pressure on those who are not respectable they went down. Sue was the first to go, and her end was perhaps more terrible than Jude's. Sue was a woman—that is, according to an idea more than once implied in Hardy's fiction, a creature incapable of development and of sustained resistance, a creature, moreover, with a tendency to revel in self-mortification. In the shock of a sudden tragedy—the murder of her children—following on the long struggle against

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the world, Sue, once a free-spirited and courageous girl, was frightened into the most dire of catastrophes, a denial of her own faith. She was seized with a lust for self-abasement before the law that she had so modestly defied, and, returning to Phillotson, drank deep of the purifying agony of being a wife to him. As for Jude, he slipped back into the hands of Arabella and died in shame and misery.

One cannot love poor Jude: one cannot love or forgive Sue Bridehead; Arabella and Phillotson are both, in their different ways, detestable. There is no one in the book whom one can love. It has its passages of serenity, as when Sue and Jude are living happily together. For the most part it is painful, and often horrible, in its picture of senseless waste and undeserved torture. One struggles to escape. If only Jude had lived elsewhere, or a little later, and could have gone to the Working Men's College or to Ruskin House! If only Jude's "sin" in mating with Arabella could have been

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visited upon his children and Sue's (and upon their parents with them) in some less horrible way than murder! If only this, or that or the other thing in the story were different! But there is no escape—except for those who can persuade themselves that circumstance could not be so cruel as Hardy makes it out, or for those who can find pleasure in the belief that Jude and Sue were sinners and deserved their punishment. This is the tragedy of the half-and-half—of people whose individuality is too strong to fit into the common scheme and too weak to keep them out of conflict with it. The mass of men are content to live safely within a comfortable moral order. He that aspires to be free of it must take his risks. For if there is no malignant deity waiting to pounce upon him, there is no kindly omnipotence to come to the rescue when his own courage, or wisdom, or strength fall short.



### III

#### HARDY THE POET

FIVE years of his youth, his twenty-second to his twenty-seventh, Hardy gave up to architecture and the writing of poetry. He intended to be a poet. In those five years he, in his own words, "practised the writing of poetry." They were like Milton's early years, devoted to the preparation for great work. And, like Milton, he resigned, or deferred, his high purpose. The true reason for an action is often different from the reason which the actor believes to influence him; and I cannot help thinking that, just as in Milton the politician and pamphleteer must out before the poet could have free play, so in Hardy's far less public and spectacular circumstances, some need of his nature must be satisfied by the writing of the novels before the poet could get to work. A poet,

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however, he had intended to be, and a great poet in the end he became. He has told us, in a preface, that the reception of *Jude the Obscure* completely cured him of his interest in novel-writing. That may be true. A deeper truth, I suspect, is that his work as novelist was finished, and that the time had come when the poet must find expression.

It is amusing now to look back on the days before *The Dynasts*. When *The Well-Beloved* was published, and readers, already puzzled by *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and by *Jude the Obscure*, were still further puzzled by that quaint fantasy, the tendency was to fall back on the great prose tragedies of the middle period as Hardy's supreme work. Unaware that *The Well-Beloved* was actually written before *Jude the Obscure*, people even talked of failing powers. Then came two volumes of poems, *Wessex Poems* (1898) and *Poems of the Past and Present* (1901); and they were regarded as interesting parerga on the part of a great writer of prose. And then, in 1904, Mr Hardy issued the first

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part of *The Dynasts*. One must admit that it was a trying moment. Here was an author, whose work was supposed to be finished, not only breaking out afresh, but breaking out with something utterly new. There was nothing like it in literature. The greatness in it was obvious; but what about the greatness of it? Could the colossal scheme—three parts, thirteen acts and one hundred and thirty scenes—possibly be carried through? And if it were carried through, was the result going to be a great poem, a great artistic whole, a great invention in form, or a magnificent jumble, a titanic failure? It is as easy to answer these questions now as it was natural to ask them a decade ago. We have the whole of *The Dynasts*; and we know it to be incomparably the greatest work that Hardy has ever produced, one of the greatest works in literature; as great as it is long, as single as it is multifarious. *The Woodlanders*, *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*—there they stand, and nothing can

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shake or diminish them. They would be enough to support a great fame; but, so far as comparison is possible, *The Dynasts* is greater than them all. To future generations Hardy will mean first and foremost the author of *The Dynasts*.

It is best, perhaps, to approach this great poem by way of the minor poems, because there is a sense in which *The Dynasts* is the perfect flower of Hardy the poet and of Hardy the novelist. His novels of themselves show his power of handling a great tragic argument with elevation, dignity and passion. Through his lyric poems we have to learn his power over metre and rhyme, and his command of that intensity of measured utterance which, in the end, makes the difference between poetry and prose.

As a writer of lyrics, Hardy is not among the greatest. The secret of lyric poetry is, for all, joy. It may be the simple Elizabethan joy in the spring and the eyes of a woman; it may be joy in a love that has flamed through flesh to spirit; it may be

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joy in a various and wonderful world; or joy in the Divine vision; or joy in the hope of a state of perfection on earth, and faith in man's power to reach it. It may even be the fine, heady joy of defiance flung in the face of fate. It is always a conscious gladness in power and vitality. We have seen enough of the bent of Hardy's mind to guess that in him the consciousness of power common to all great artists cannot jet out in pure exultation or hope, nor in defiance of a fate that neither hears nor cares. He cannot believe, like Shelley, that love is eternal and almighty; he is not just happy, like Browning; and he is not, like Meredith, aflame with the clear light of a reasonable faith. His own intensity of feeling is, in fact, at variance with his vision of the universe; and, thanks to his indomitable rectitude, so much of his feeling as can escape into expression is not ebullient joy. Always his intellect is at war with his emotions; he cannot give himself wholly and simply up. The result is extraordinarily interesting.

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There is nothing quite like Hardy's lyric poetry. It can hardly be said to sing. Indeed, on a first reading, it is easy to miss the music altogether, and to notice only that occasional stiffness which we have noticed in his prose, his compressed and sometimes clogged diction. Further study will show that, in spite of rare echoes of the manner of other poets, this poet has worked out for himself, with his masterly rectitude and self-reliance, a very varied, very individual music. Once more, he achieves nothing by accident. He has never trusted, one would say, words that forced themselves upon him, as other poets, and Wordsworth in particular, have trusted them, with effects miraculous. In Hardy's lyric poetry there is nothing miraculous. There are no flashing phrases, no single lines that seem to open windows to the infinite. It is hammered out; but it is hammered fine, and out of fine matter. It is never prose cut into lengths and rhymed. Its chief characteristics are simplicity and intensity. Like the

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prose it clings with minute fidelity to the author's precise meaning ; and this, whether it is passionately searching the infinity of space and time or recording a slight incident of emotion or thought. It can be splendid, and it can be drab ; it is always simple and intense.

If Hardy's place as lyric poet is not so much with the " natural " singers as with the philosophical lyricists of the seventeenth century, his poetry is differentiated from theirs by the intensity of his feeling. We go, people tell us, to Wordsworth for consolation, to Browning for hope and energy, to Meredith for counsel and aspiration. It may be so. But first of all we go to poets for poetry, and Hardy is no less a poet because he cannot be discovered to prescribe for any disease of the mind. What his lyric poetry gives is the communication of intense feeling, and the sympathetic enlargement that must come of the contemplation of any soul deeply moved by the crosses and contradictions of life. Many of the poems,

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their author warns us, are "dramatic or impersonative." Well and good; but a mind reveals itself through its imaginings no less than through its deliberate beliefs and denials, and these imaginings must take their place among "the unadjusted impressions" which, he holds, "have their value." And, to continue our quotation, "the road to a true philosophy of life seems to be in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance or change." It is not, therefore, unfounded presumption that would find in Hardy's lyric poems the privilege of a closer intimacy with the mind that created the novels. The novels cannot be fully appreciated without a knowledge of the poems; but there is a sense in which the novels only lead up to the poems. For the poems offer an intenser and by some degrees a more personal expression of the ideas and experiences upon which the novels are built.

The volumes of minor poetry are four;



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*Wessex Poems* (1898), which is illustrated with some interesting drawings by the author; *Poems of the Past and Present* (1901); *Time's Laughing-Stocks* (1909), and *Satires of Circumstance* (1914). The contents were composed at various times in Mr Hardy's working life and are various in subject and form. There are yarns of the Napoleonic wars, merry and tragic ballads, little stories of a bitter and sometimes a savage irony; grave and beautiful love poems; poems of a profound tenderness; speculations, spurts of anger; poems on the South African War, poems in dialect and poems august and high-sounding. Amid all this variety the reader, dipping where he will, will find always the unmistakable signs of the same strongly individual mind, seeing acutely, feeling intensely, and expressing itself powerfully. Perhaps the pleasantest, the most musically and suggestively beautiful poems that Hardy ever wrote are the "Poems of 1912-13" in *Satires of Circumstance*. They are intimate, they are personal, they are gentle; they

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come like a fresh breeze on the fall of a summer evening. But I find myself going back again and again to the more definitely philosophical poems scattered throughout the four volumes: those in which the poet speaks most directly of his thoughts concerning the government of the world and the destiny of man.

And since he is, in effect, speaking here directly for himself, we may expect to find poems of a great sadness. We find, too, especially among the youthful poems, some of great bitterness. These are not pleasant. Were it not for this force of feeling and expression, they would make bad reading. But a man does not forgo palliatives and face a dark future in a mood of jollity; and some of the finest spirits—Shakespeare and Shelley among them—have cried out when they were hurt. If there were something to defy, one of Hardy's poems tells us, malignity would be easier to bear than the crass casualty of purblind doomsters; it is his sorrow, not his joy, says another, that he

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cannot comfortably acquiesce in the simple faith of his neighbours. Solace, a third poem tells us, is to be gained not from seeing, but from dreaming, when perhaps a fine morning may cheat the mind into imagining "a benignant plan." Very rarely do we find even so much of faith as Meredith expressed in his counsel to trust Nature, or Earth; and very rarely so much of hope as we find in the address to "the unknown God" which closes the volume of *Poems of the Past and Present*. The sweetest and bravest note of all is that which here and there sings of men

"In brotherhood bounded close and graced  
With loving-kindness fully blown,  
And visioned help unsought, unknown."

Many of these lyric poems must inevitably pain those whose faith in the human spirit, whether within or without the pale of revealed religion, flames high; but for those who are seeking closer knowledge of the mind which gave us the novels and *The Dynasts*, they remain documents of profound

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interest. And they are more than that. They are intense and burning expressions of thoughts that must waylay all who are walking the path of truth alone.

All the poems, grave or humorous, ballad or sonnet, philosophical or narrative, and all the novels with them, lead up to *The Dynasts*. *The Return of the Native*, or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is "big" enough, indeed; but since *The Dynasts* was finished it has become clear that Hardy needed a bigger field yet for the expression of himself. In *The Dynasts* we have, at last, the whole man at work, with every faculty and interest contributing to the great and single effect. He had done noble work in prose; in poetry he had not allowed himself any long flight. Yet it became clear that to move at his freest and noblest he must use poetry. *The Dynasts*, his supreme achievement, is a great poem.

Hardy first called it a drama; he has changed the description to an epic-drama. The term is useful, in so far as it calls atten-

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tion to the form—a poem with the scope and variety of an epic, but written entirely in dialogue, with stage directions as the narrative and descriptive portions. Yet in thinking of *The Dynasts* I find myself always regarding it as epic rather than as drama; or—to emphasise a meaningless but still useful distinction—as a poem rather than as a play. Extracts from the poem were recently put on the stage in London; and the production served to show that, if you are going to make a stage play of *The Dynasts*, you must be very careful not to treat it as if it were, absolutely, a stage play, written for performance in an ordinary theatre. The dramatic quality of certain scenes was well brought out. The vast sweep of the poem, its infinite variety, its mighty speed, its mystery and majesty, its poetic unity, in fact all the *bigness* of it—these were lost. The proportions were destroyed. Man became huge and the heavens were tucked away in corners. I believe that any practicable performance of

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*The Dynasts*—even of the kind suggested by the author at the close of his preface: “A monotonic delivery of speeches, with dreamy conventional gestures, something in the manner traditionally maintained by the old Christmas mummers,” with “gauzes or screens to blur outlines” and still further to “shut off the actual”—must destroy its proportions and cramp its movement, for this reason, if for no other: that the stage appeals to the eye, and the body’s eye cannot do what *The Dynasts* demands of the mind’s eye. And that is partly why I think of *The Dynasts* as an epic rather than as a drama, a great poem rather than as a great play. It has been objected that an epic is meant to be read, a play to be seen; and that in adopting the dramatic form Hardy has unnecessarily hampered himself and burdened the reader. It may be true in principle that the dramatic form is not suited for reading, and in practice that most plays do not read well. The appeal to experience is both the safest and the most consonant with Mr

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Hardy's genius; and the experience of most readers will surely be that in *The Dynasts* the dramatic form, with its various kinds of type and various length of line, presents no obstacle to the eye. On the contrary, the variety of print, like the variety of metre and the changes from poetry to prose, becomes, after a page or two, a positive help to the apprehension of the poem's import.

*The Dynasts* has all the material of an epic: its wars and battles, its heroes, its orators, its celestial machinery of divine beings who explain, influence and even share the action; its descriptions, which in *The Dynasts* are printed as stage directions—all the components that make up the *Iliad*, or the *Æneid*, or *Paradise Lost*. The conflict is not between Greeks and Trojans, or between angels and devils; it is, ultimately, between French and English during the Napoleonic wars. And there the likeness to other epic poems comes to an end. The old material is put to new uses, and a form which men had suspected of being outworn

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is recast and filled with new and abounding life. A hundred years hence, when the hour has come for a new great epic of European history, may England have as great and as daring a poet as Hardy to write it!

The epic tells the story of Napoleon's career, from his intended invasion of England in 1804 to his defeat at Waterloo in 1815. No reader of Hardy's novels and minor poems needs to be told of the fascination which this period of history has exercised upon Hardy's mind, from the days when, as a boy, he talked with veterans of Waterloo and lived among scenes where men had thrilled with the fear of invasion, to the days when, in middle age, he presented the whole story in its vast unity and infinite variety. Here, in *The Dynasts*, we have the heroic tale, in a form which no historian could hope to emulate.

The first part takes the story from the attempt to repeal the Defence Act in the British Parliament down to the death of Pitt, showing the coronation of Napoleon



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in Milan Cathedral, his preparations at Boulogne for the invasion of England, the battles of Ulm and Austerlitz, and Trafalgar, with the death of Nelson. The second part shows Napoleon still waxing in power. It gives the defeat of the Prussians at Jena, the meeting of Napoleon and Alexander of Russia at Tilsit, the battle of Wagram, the disastrous Walcheren expedition; the divorce of Napoleon from Josephine, his marriage with Marie-Louise of Austria and the birth of their son. It gives, too, the abdication of the King of Spain, and the arrival of Joseph Buonaparte to take his throne; but it gives also the progress of the Peninsular War under Wellesley — history's subtly dramatic preparation for the events of the third and last part. The Russian expedition of 1812, the British victories in the Pyrenees, and the battle of Leipzig lead up to Napoleon's banishment to Elba; then comes his escape, his return to power, Ligny, Quatre Bras, Waterloo.

This, may be, is the most tremendous tale,

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not excepting the prolonged decadence and fall of Rome, that history could tell before the year 1914; and he must indeed be a great genius who could rise to the height of such an argument. The reader who fixes his attention chiefly on the human part of the epic, abstracting it, so far as may be, from the "celestial machinery," will find himself at the close impressed by the completeness of the poet's work. The history, though "boiled down," or rather triple-refined, is minutely accurate; the poet is scrupulous to warn his readers of his least departure from chronological order or recorded fact. It is, moreover, far more consecutive and complete than the modest remarks in the preface on "a panoramic show" and on the foreknowledge with which the reader is required to "fill in the junctions" would imply. The truth is that the story of the epic is intelligible to readers who have the haziest notions of the historical facts. Completeness and accuracy of narrative, however, are very small parts of an

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epic poem's functions. The *Iliad* shows the heroes of Greece at war with the heroes of Troy; the *Æneid* glorifies the Romans in the person of their great Trojan ancestor and at the expense of the men of Latium. From Hardy, the philosophic artist concerned always with the creation of an imagined world that shall represent his vision of the actual world, we shall not expect patriotic heroics of that kind. His aim will be neither to exalt the deeds of heroes nor to glorify a nation or a throne. But his poem is an epic of nations; and few things are more remarkable than the ease with which he exchanges a corner of Wessex for the whole of Europe, a set of half-a-dozen obscure villagers for the kings and peoples of half the world. An epic, again, must have its humble, human element—the kind of touch which even Virgil introduced into the *Æneid* by means of the games. No epic ever written is so rich in racy humanity as *The Dynasts*. Continually the poet takes care to show the “mere man” or the “mere

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woman" in the great personages of the story; and now and then he sets us down among the humble folk, in the streets of London, on a beacon hill, on a village green, and lets us see how his mighty argument affected the little ones of the earth. The scope of the poem takes in all who were affected by the wars of those ten years: nations, towns, villages, kings, queens, princesses, statesmen, generals, private soldiers, camp-followers, English rustics and Spanish jades. It takes in events very "great" and events very "small": the retreat from Moscow, the battle of Trafalgar; a party at the Prince Regent's and the burning of a dummy on a village green. And all this immense variety of character and of movement, of tone and temper and incident, is marshalled in the unity of perfect order. When Thackeray tried to reconstruct a period, he gave us *Esmond*; and *Esmond* is a work of genius. But, in reading *Esmond*, one is always looking at the period from the outside and thinking how cleverly it has been

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reproduced. In reading the human part of *The Dynasts* one is taken inside the period, to live in it for oneself. This is the result, not of Hardy's minute knowledge only (Becker, the author of the useful but unattractive *Charicles* and *Gallus*, had knowledge and to spare of ancient Greece and Rome), but of the poet's great imagination, his masterful power of ordering an immense and various material, so that his reproduction of dead fact shall have living power. The vitality, the "aliveness" of *The Dynasts*, is amazing. The story is profoundly moving and wildly exciting. And the greatness of the theme has called out all that is greatest in the poet. There is no trace in *The Dynasts* of that spirit of crossness, or of bitterness, which peeps out here and there in the novels.

As a story of human beings the poem is grand and shapely. The parts of *The Dynasts* that are printed in roman letters make up a noble whole. But a good deal of *The Dynasts* is printed in italics; and the italics give the poem its higher unity and

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its profounder significance. The epic has its celestial machinery: not to explain the woes of man by the squabbles of Olympians; not, certainly, to assert Eternal Providence and justify the ways of God to men, but to give to this story of certain human beings the universality which shall make it a poetical embodiment of all life, with a general as well as a particular truth. Once more, we must be on our guard against pressing so dramatic an author as Hardy too closely. The doctrines implied or stated through his celestial beings are, he warns us, "but tentative, and are advanced with little eye to a systematised philosophy warranted to lift 'the burthen of the mystery' of this unintelligible world." Nevertheless, just as his patient and faithful recording, in the novels, of human life as he saw it has resulted in the creation of a vision of life as a whole, so the celestial machinery of *The Dynasts* presents, more explicitly than any other of Hardy's works, the view of life which the novels had adumbrated.

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The “irony<sup>e</sup> of circumstance” is expressed in terms of poetry.

At the head of this new hierarchy (for it is easiest to approach the idea through the ill-fitting nomenclature of the old hierarchies) is the Immanent Will. The Immanent Will is the force that keeps the world going. It is blind, deaf and unconscious. It sleeps and it never was awake. It has no purpose, good or evil; but work on it must. It is at once the universal will, and the will of each human being.

“A Will that wills above the will of each,  
Yet but the will of all conjunctively.”

The characters in the epic are, in the main, unconscious of its influence; they know only each his own will. Napoleon alone seems to realise its existence and power as distinct from his own desires. At moments the poet actually shows us visually this Immanent, universal and yet particular Will. In the Fore Scene of Part I. of the epic—the Prologue (as it might be called) in Heaven

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—the Will is made visible in “waves like winds grown visible,” in “retracting threads like gossamers.” It “overrides man as a whole its parts”; it is the impulsion and condition under which the tremendous drama of men and nations is played out. Linking this prime mover of man’s life with the personages and deeds of the epic are a set of Phantom Intelligences. There is the Ancient Spirit of the Years, with his Chorus of the Years. It is he, or it, who explains to others of the Phantom Intelligences what the Will is, and how it works. But his only function is to observe and record what happens through the centuries; it is not in him to feel with or against man or men. The feeling is all with the Spirit of the Pities and the Chorus of the Pities. It is they who sympathise with the mannikins worked by the Will, who plead for mercy, who protest:

“But O, the intolerable antilogy  
Of making figments feel!”



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There is, 'as we shall see, a grain of consolation for them in the end ; but the double purpose of their introduction into the epic is to intensify the reader's sympathies with suffering men and nations, and also, through the continual rebuffs which their pleadings and hopes receive from the Spirit of the Years, to drive home the philosophical conception, or fancy, upon which the epic is built. Opposed to them there are Spirits Sinister and Ironic, with their choruses, who deserve perhaps the title of evil. They represent the mocking and cruel elements which all men are forced now and then to see in the government of the world. Their coarse jests, their delight in suffering, their bitter irony figure forth the old notion of a jealous and sportive heaven that enjoys the misery of man. Then, as Hermes or Iris came down from Olympus in the old epics, to be the messenger of the gods, we must have some means of direct communication between the Will and the wills ; and this duty is fulfilled by the Spirit of Rumour,

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with his chorus, who may take on human form and mingle with men on earth, sowing truth or lies, carrying news, and creating events. There are spirit-messengers, also, who perform similar duties. All these Phantom Intelligences are in more or less direct communication with man; and all share with the Recording Angels the work of making a consecutive story of events by narrating or discussing such incidents as the poet has not exhibited in dramatic form. And finally there is the Spirit of the Earth, who, bound in inexplicable thralldom, must wait, and watch and wonder.

These Phantom Intelligences, affected by the action, continually commenting on it, and sometimes interfering in it, are Mr Hardy's answer to the great "Why?" the idea-plot, so to speak, of his poem. Without them, *The Dynasts* would be an epic of nations and of men; with them, it is an epic of the universe and of human life. To examine the philosophical value, or the truth, of the conception is outside the scope

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of this little introduction to the poem. Its poetical value is of great moment. It makes for exterior unity by connecting the action.

Earlier in this book something was said about Hardy's double vision. The vision in *The Dynasts* has become multiple. We are now among men on the earth, seeing them life-size; now so far above them that armies on the march look like caterpillars; now among the Intelligences gazing down, as it were, from heaven. Readers of historical novels will have observed, in all but the greatest, the jerk with which the story passes from historical events on the grand scale to the personal adventures of the hero or heroine. From any jerks of this kind Hardy's selection, or creation, of a form, and, still more, his multiplicity of vision and mastery of arrangement, have saved him. And here the Phantom Intelligences play an important part. They have a technical as well as a philosophical use, for they preserve, better, perhaps, than the celestial beings in any other epic, the idea

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of the infinite possibility of visual adjustment. We are wafted on the poet's mighty wings to the zenith; we are lowered to earth. We see the story and the people from all sides, and in all relations.

Multiplicity of vision, however masterfully controlled, is of no merit without unity of vision; and in *The Dynasts* this unity or multiplicity is due to more than the poet's technical mastery. As with the novels, to the question: "What is *The Dynasts* about?" the answer may be: "It is about the Napoleonic wars," or it may be: "It is about man and the universe—it is about life." As the preface tells us :

"the scheme of contrasted Choruses and other conventions of this eternal feature was shaped with a single view to the modern expression of a modern outlook, and in frank divergence from classical and other dramatic precedent which ruled the ancient voicings of ancient themes."

There is no epic so permeated, illuminated and unified by the presence and influence of

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those supernaturals in whom man clothes his ideas of the world's government. The idea, revealed in vision, or in action, or in word, gives the higher unity to the great human story.

I remember how, after reading the first part of *The Dynasts* on its separate publication, I felt that this conception of celestial machinery must dwarf the human story and deprive the great human deeds, good or evil, of all heroism and grandeur. The complete work not only reveals the apprehension to be groundless but directly falsifies it. The Immanent Will is, after all, each man's will, so long as each man believes it to be his; and man, though a "painted shape," a figment, can yet feel. Nothing in the human story is belittled; but the whole is folded in pity for this great and little human nature working out, magnificently or meanly, its destiny under the impulse of a power which it has not even the satisfaction of being able to curse and to defy as a malignant enemy.

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Unity in variety, again, is obvious in the literary method and materials of this diverse epic-drama. The work is written in blank verse, in odes, in short lyrics, in prose. The metres are many. Mr Hardy uses now something that we commonly know as a "Limerick"; now a long, swinging line; now a complicated and ornate stanza. As to the prose, the writer who showed himself in the novels a master of selection and intense expression has even refined upon his previous achievements in framing the descriptive passages, or stage directions, of his epic-drama. These are not "poetic," like the descriptions in Homer or Virgil; and they do not lend themselves to dramatic declamation. But some of them, and notably those in the last part, describing the field of Waterloo, are among the finest pieces of prose that Hardy has written; while here and there his reticence is tremendous. The rustics, too, indulge their Shakespearian, or Hardian, humour in prose as rich and racy as any in the novels. The blank

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verse, not always musical, and seldom of a magically creative beauty, is extraordinarily various in temper and movement, and seems to have an amazing power of expressing intensely and enduringly all that the poet means to convey. And in reading the epic, it is a constant joy to observe how unerringly the writer chooses the fittest form for his material, how aptly he makes the transitions of tone and spirit. Through all this diversity, indeed, there proclaims itself the hand of the same great dramatic yet strongly individual poet; the rigid fidelity to purpose at the expense of mere ornament; the occasional sharpness or stiffness of phrasing which are characteristic of this scrupulously sincere mind. For this, his greatest theme, he found his greatest utterance.

At the time when I am writing it is impossible to read *The Dynasts* without thinking of the European War, and asking what the poet has to say about war in general. Between the present war and the war of a century ago, as exhibited by Hardy, there

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is a striking resemblance. In *The Dynasts* England is the foe most hated by the despot; to England and English gold he ascribes all his difficulties and misfortunes. And yet in all *The Dynasts* there is scarcely a hint, outside the speeches of Pitt and other politicians, that England, in fighting Napoleon, was fighting for the benefit of humanity. As the title of the epic implies, this is all a game of kings and rulers. Willy nilly, the common people are forced into it, to suffer horribly, and to "profit nought for those who profit all." To some extent, no doubt, this may have been true—far truer than it is of the present war, in which, whatever one's view of the government of the universe, one may hardly doubt that on one side lies tyranny and hatred, on the other freedom and loving-kindness.

But the purpose of *The Dynasts* is not, like the purpose of the *Æneid*, the glorification of any one race or cause. It is something much wider and deeper than that; and the poet is content to let the story tell



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for itself what part England played and for what aim England took arms. He is more concerned to move our feelings on behalf of all the soldiers, of whatever nation. Pity for the soldiers—a class of men whom Hardy, as we may judge from his prose and poems, admires and respects—pity for all suffering humanity, for wounded animals, and for all things that are caught in the working of the heedless Will, is on every page; but the poet of *The Dynasts* sees war as an un-mixed evil—if evil is a word that may fairly be used in this connection. That, indeed, is a point to remember in reading Hardy. Evil implies blame; and, from this standpoint, there is no object on which blame can be fixed.

“The intolerable antilogy Of making figments feel” is no one’s fault. It is not heaven’s fault, for heaven is and ever was unconscious. It is not man’s fault, for man acts under the compulsion of a will which is his own, yet not his own. Therefore consolation is outside the artistic business

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of *The Dynasts*, as it is outside the artistic business of the novels.

Yet, if consolation there is none, there is abundant admiration for man's devotion and man's love. Many of the "stage directions" glow with unworded admiration of the courage and steadfastness of the little, brief puppet, man. More yet; here and there in the epic there are gleams of something that is nearly hope—far from an assured promise, fainter even than a wish to believe in man's progress towards wisdom and happiness, but at least the recognition that there is no obligation to despair. Uncontradicted, the Pities are permitted to dream, at the very end of the Second Part:

"Yet It may wake and understand  
Ere Earth unshape, know all things, and  
With Knowledge use a painless hand,  
A painless hand!"

• And in their magnificent final chorus, when all the tragic drama has been played out, the Pities still dare to sing:

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“ But—a stirring thrills the air  
Like to sounds of joyance there  
That the rages  
Of the ages  
Still be cancelled, and deliverance offered  
from the darts that were,  
Consciousness the Will informing, till It  
fashion all things fair! ”

Those are the last words of the poet's “ modern expression of a modern outlook ” ; and, though they are given to the “ impressionable and inconsistent ” Pities, they justify the belief that this dramatic presentation of the governance of life, if it leaves no room for hope, at least excludes despair. More than that we must not ask.

This epic-drama remains, for the present, the crowning expression of that passion for the truth which characterises all Hardy's work. He has made it his business to create an image of life as he sees it ; and no author has more rigidly denied himself the allurements of smooth things which he knew to be fictitious, and of beliefs or hopes that his

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reason would not accept. And, if it be concluded from this that the effect of his work is to depress aspiration and smother effort, the answer can only be an appeal to the work itself. Even more than the finest among the tragic novels, the tragic poem is full of a great pity and a great patience. It cannot comfort ; but it does better. Like all great tragedy, it is “ kathartic,” purging those who learn to love it of meanness and impatience and self-pity. Like all great arts, it exalts and enlarges. Perhaps, in the end, that is the word for Hardy’s work. At its best, it is great work. He is a great mind, and writes great things. Had he continued to practise architecture, he would have built great buildings, so individual in taste as to incur from academic critics the charge of perverseness, while the open-minded learned more and more to understand and to value the adaptation of means to purpose, the richness and flavour of the artist’s character there expressed, the grandeur or the comfortable homeliness of

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effect, the daring modifications of thoroughly mastered tradition to the particular need. It is well for the world that he gave up architecture for literature. Only the United States would have had the courage to employ him and the architectural air and soil in which his genius might develop ; and books may cross oceans while buildings may not. In literature there has been nothing but the timidity of conventional minds to hamper his progress. Certain passages in prefaces or poems seem to prove that, with the sensitiveness of the artist, he has been unduly hurt by perfectly valueless stricture, while, with the passion of the artist, he has persisted, by this means or by that, in the expression of his thought. We have seen that occasionally he hurts, or shocks, or rasps ; that now and then he takes what would popularly be called a " low view " of love and of the human spirit, apparently mistaking the futility of man's effort and heroism, which is postulated by his presented view of the universe, for some

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deficiency in the effort and heroism themselves. But where in the history of man is there a spirit so fine that it has not now and then cried out in its agony? And there is little fear that ordinary percipience should confuse Hardy's attitude to life with the luxurious woe of those who cry "Vanitas Vanitatum: omnia Vanitas!" or the careless shrug of the school of "Tout lasse, tout passe, tout casse!" Still less is there in him of that wry-mouthed dread of power and joy which many modern writers cloak under a pretence that nothing is "life" which is not sordid and bitter. There is power in all the great and tragic characters of his novels; their capacity for joy, their desire for joy, is precisely that which brings them into conflict with the unconscious Will. And in *The Dynasts* he undertakes to show the mightiest human ambitions at work, a terrific and all but universal conflict in progress, and reveals himself great enough to grasp the subject whole, to exhibit all its passion and all its pity, yet to keep it still

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in its due relation to the scope and destiny of man as he sees them. In that opposition between the blind, unconscious operation of Circumstance and the passionate consciousness of man lies the secret of Hardy's tragic power and tragic intensity. He finds his heroes and heroines in humble places or in high, on Egdon Heath, in courts or in battlefields. For he is the poet of common humanity; and his creative fire, his artist's passion, is kindled by the sadness and the splendour of common humanity's condition in the real and daily world.

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(By ARUNDELL ESDAILE)

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The Wessex Novels. Rearranged as follows:—

#### I. *Novels of Character and Environment*

1. Tess of the D'Urbervilles; 2. Far from the Madding Crowd; 3. Jude the Obscure; 4. The Return of the Native; 5. The Mayor of Casterbridge; 6. The Woodlanders; 7. Under the Greenwood Tree; 8. Life's Little Ironies; 9. Wessex Tales.

#### II. *Romances and Fantasies*

10. A Pair of Blue Eyes; 11. The Trumpet-Major; 12. Two on a Tower; 13. The Well-Beloved; 14. A Group of Noble Dames.

#### III. *Novels of Ingenuity*

15. Desperate Remedies; 16. The Hand of Ethelberta; 17. A Laodicean.

#### IV. *Mixed Novels*

18. A Changed Man; The Waiting Supper, and other Tales, concluding with The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid.

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